

Madrid, 4/3/93.

Dear Sir:

Although I know you only from good references of your honesty my sad situation compels me to reveal you an important affair in which you can procure a modest fortune saving at the same time that of my darling daughter.

Before being imprisoned here I was established as a Banker in Russia as you will see by the enclosed article about me of many English newspapers which have published my arrest in London.

I beseech you to help me to obtain a sum of 480,000 dollars I have in America and to come here to raise the seizure of my baggage by paying to the Registrar of the Court the expenses of my trial and recover my portmanteaus containing a secret pocket where I have hidden the document indispensable to recover the said sum.

As a reward I will give up to you the third part viz 160,000 dollars.

I cannot receive your answer in the prison but you must send a cablegram to a person of my confidence who will deliver it to me.

Awaiting your cable to instruct you in all my secret. I am Sir
yours truly

E. Ivanovitch

First of all, answer by cable, not by letter, as follows:

Antonio Barrios
Lista Telegrafos - Santander (Spain)
"arrival article"

Dear

Madrid, 4/3/913.

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First of all, answer by cable, not by letter, as follows:

Antonio Barrios
Lenta Telegrafos - Santander (Spain)
"arrival article"

Dear

An unusual piece of rural Oregon mail history (1912–1913)

Allen J. Dear Spanish Prisoner's Scheme Letter

Reflections

Jeffrey Hunt

January 8 2026

This handwritten letter arrived in Oakland, Oregon in 1913, sent from Madrid, Spain to my great-grandfather, Allen J. Dear, a fruit grower. Umpqua Valley orchards in Douglas County, Oregon were economically important at the time and well connected by rail, mail, and telegraph—but it is still striking to see international correspondence like this turning up in a small agricultural town.

The letter arrived in Oakland in 1913 and survived folded into a leather wallet discovered inside a small steel box of family materials. I believe this steel box was carried by my grandfather when he left the family homestead during the Great Depression. The box appears to contain the items he chose to carry forward—family photographs, documents, and personal papers. The wallet, and this letter inside it, was simply part of that collection.

At first glance, the letter reads like what we would now recognize as an early confidence scheme or advance-fee fraud. The writer claims to be in serious trouble, refers to a large sum of money allegedly tied up in the United States, and promises a substantial reward in exchange for discreet assistance. The letter is signed by someone identifying himself as “E. Ivanovitch,” who claims to be a former Russian banker imprisoned abroad and urges that any reply be sent by telegraph rather than mail.

What makes the letter especially interesting is that contemporary newspapers quickly recognized the scheme. Articles published in 1912 describe nearly identical letters circulating across the country—often mailed from Spain, often invoking a Russian prisoner, and often promising enormous sums of money. Reporters referred to it at the time as the “Spanish prisoner” or “old scheme,” a well-known precursor to modern international fraud letters.

What continues to stand out to me is the rural Oregon connection. The sender clearly believed that a fruit grower in Oakland might have both the means and the discretion to help. That assumption says something about how orchardists and landowners in this region were perceived economically in the early 1900s.

The envelope is worn, the stamp long ago removed for a collection, and the letter shows every sign of having been handled and passed around. My guess is that it was saved not because it was believed, but because it was so strange—an improbable letter from Madrid, signed by a supposed Russian banker in jail, asking for vast sums of money. It was odd enough to keep.

To me, it's a small but vivid reminder that while the names, locations, and technologies change, the underlying mechanics of these schemes—and human curiosity about them—remain remarkably consistent.

Estados Unidos

Allen J. Dear
Fruit Grower

Oakland
(Oregon)



Madrid, 4/3/913.

Dear Sir:

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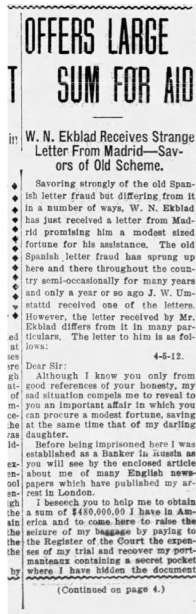
yours truly

E. Ivanovitch

First of all, answer by cable, not by letter, as follows:

Antonio Barrios
Lenta Telegrafos - Santander (Spain)
"arrival article"

Dear



The World (New York)
May 30, 1912

Submitted by Steve Huckins
via Facebook group *Forgotten Oregon*

OFFERS LARGE SUM FOR AID

W. N. Ekblad Receives Strange Letter From Madrid—Savoring of Old Scheme.

Savoring strongly of the old Spanish letter fraud but differing from it in a number of ways, W. N. Ekblad has just received a letter from Madrid promising him a modest sized fortune for his assistance. The old Spanish letter fraud has sprung up here and there throughout the country semi-occasionally for many years and only a year or so ago J. W. Umstaddt received one of the letters. However, the letter received by Mr. Ekblad differs from it in many particulars. The letter to him is as follows:

4-5-12.

Dear Sir:

Although I know you only from good references of your honesty, my sad situation compels me reveal to you an important affair in which you can procure a modest fortune, saving at the same time that of my darling daughter.

Before being imprisoned here I was established as a Banker in Russia and you will see by the enclosed article about me of many English newspapers which have published my arrest in London.

I beseech you to help me to obtain the sum of \$480,000.00 I have in America and to come here to raise the seizure of my baggage by paying to the Register of the Court the expenses of my trial and recover my portmanteaux containing a secret packet where I have hidden some documents indispensable to recover the said sum. As reward I give up to you the third part, or \$160,000.00.

I cannot receive your answer by mail from not yet been a chargeable to a person in my confidence who will deliver it to you.

I await your reply.



Yours truly,

VASCONETTI.

First of all answer by cable not a letter as follows,

Leon Campos, Valladolid, Spain.

The cable referred to in the letter follows:

Some months ago, as our readers may remember, we referred in these columns to the great scandal in St. Petersburg and in Russia generally, by a noted banker who afterward became fugitive.

The Russian police sought for him for a long time in vain, for it seems he had not left the east during the night and the continued search over Europe and America proved unavailing.

Yesterday, however, a Spanish expert accompanied by two officers from Scotland Yard and acting under instructions of the Spanish Ambassador, who had previously interviewed the Home Secretary, arrested him on his way from the hotel where he was staying to the steamship office. It seems that it was his evident intention to take passage to New York. From information received by the Ambassador, he had been in hiding in Spain, where he lived with a woman and with his daughter. A few days before arriving in London he had quarreled with another Russian, who was mortally wounded by a revolver shot during the same and who lived only long enough to denounce his assailant.

In an interview with the Russian Ambassador, it seems that the name he had been using in Spain, and which he gave on being arrested, was not his real name, Vasconetti being an alias, but after comparing the prisoner with photographs in his possession, the Russian Ambassador recognized him as Alexis Ivanovitch, the criminal banker who eloped with five million rubles. He is a native of St. Petersburg, a widower, 38 years old, with an only daughter that he left in Spain on escaping from that country. On being arrested two of Vasconetti's or Alexis Ivanovitch's letters were seized, but although strictly searched nothing but personal effects were found in them, in spite of which the Russian Ambassador declares that the prisoner ought to have several million rubles.

The Russian and Spanish Ambassadors conferred yesterday evening as to whether the prisoner should be conveyed to Spain or Russia, and after an interview with the Home Secretary, and in accordance with extradition treaties of England, Russia and Spain, it was agreed that the prisoner should be conveyed to Spain to stand trial for manslaughter, and that any sentence he had in England, and Government asks Spain, through diplomatic channels, for his extradition.



East Oregonian (Pendleton, Oregon)
October 18, 1912

Submitted by Steve Huckins
via Facebook group *Forgotten Oregon*

OLD GAME TRIED ON LOCAL MAN

The Spanish Prisoner swindlers will not down and they still try to put confidence in a good man until they finally take the hard-earned money of their selected victims.

The Spanish letter swindle has been operating in which they try to get the victims to send money or valuable information to the supposed or imaginary prisoner or banker in jail, and the latest Pendletoner to be offered the opportunity of securing a modest fortune of \$160,000 is requesting the services of a young man to get his freedom, but the tricks of the swindler are too transparent to work with the intelligent and experienced man to whom he addressed his appeal.

Acting on 29-9-1912.

Dear Sir:
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Before being imprisoned here I was established as a Banker in Russia and you will see by the enclosed article about me of many English newspapers which have published my arrest in London.

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I cannot receive your answer by mail from not yet been a chargeable to a person in my confidence who will deliver it to you.

I await your reply.
Yours truly,
IVANOVITCH.

First of all, answer by cable not a letter, as follows:
SENOR ARCHILLO,
Delicias 32—Madrid.

Accompanying the letter is a clipping that purports to be from a London newspaper describing the arrest of Alexis Ivanovitch, a Russian banker, who had fled from St. Petersburg with \$5,000,000 and had killed a fellow countryman in Spain. The article goes on to state that Ivanovitch is now in Spain and is to stand trial in the Spanish courts.